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LASZLO DOSA

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SHIFTING VIEWS ON CANCER

ANNCR:

THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY'S RECENT ANNUAL SEMINAR FOR SCIENCE WRITERS HAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT SOME SHIFTING -- AND SHARPLY DIFFERING -- VIEWS ON CANCER, THE SECOND LARGEST KILLER OF AMERICANS. VOA SCIENCE EDITOR LASZLO DOSA HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

DOCTOR DONALD KENNEDY, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL WHOSE JOB IT IS TO ENSURE THE SAFETY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF ALL DRUGS AND FOOD ADDITIVES, QUOTED A RECENT OPINION POLL WHICH HAS FOUND THAT "CANCER IS THE DISEASE AMERICANS FEAR MORE THAN THEY FEAR WAR." IN FACT, CANCER IS THE ONLY DISEASE AGAINST WHICH THE GOVERNMENT HAS DECLARED WAR. BUT CANCER IS AN ELUSIVE ENEMY. UNLIKE A SINGLE DISEASE, SUCH AS POLIO, WHICH COULD BE CONQUERED IN A CLEAR-CUT AND DRAMATIC VICTORY, CANCER IS "A COMPLEX ARRAY OF DISEASES, PROBABLY WITH MULTIPLE CAUSATION AND ALMOST CERTAINLY WITH NO SINGLE CURE." AND, AS DOCTOR KENNEDY FURTHER NOTED, THE MORE MONEY IS SPENT ON CANCER, THE MORE APPARENT THE COMPLEXITY OF ITS PROBLEM.

ANOTHER GOVERNMENT SCIENTIST, DOCTOR ARTHUR UPTON, DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE, IS THE COMMANDING GENERAL OF THE WAR ON CANCER. THAT WAR IS BEING FOUGHT ON SEVERAL FRONTS: ONE ARMY OF SCIENTISTS IS STILL TRYING TO DISCOVER THE CAUSES OF CANCER. ANOTHER ARMY IS ACTUALLY FIGHTING THE DISEASE, TRYING TO CURE OR, AT LEAST, TREAT ITS VICTIMS. STILL ANOTHER ARMY OF RESEARCHERS HAS THE TASK OF PREVENTING CANCER.

DOCTOR UPTON SHARES THE BELIEF OF MANY OTHER SCIENTISTS THAT ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS -- CHEMICALS, RADIATIONS, AND POSSIBLY VIRUSES -- INTERACT WITH HEREDITARY INFORMATION IN THE CELLS TO PRODUCE A COMPLEX SEQUENCE OF EVENTS WHICH LEAD TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CANCER. THE ESTIMATES VARY, BUT UP TO NINETY PERCENT OF ALL CANCERS IS BELIEVED TO BE CAUSED BY ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS. THIS DOES NOT NECESSARILY MEAN, HOWEVER, THAT ELIMINATION OF ALL OF THOSE SUSPECTED ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS WOULD LEAD TO THE ELIMINATION OF NINETY PERCENT OF ALL CANCERS.

THERE IS ONE ENVIRONMENTAL FACTOR -- CIGARETTE SMOKING -- WHICH IS UNIVERSALLY REGARDED AS THE CAUSE OF SEVERAL CANCERS. THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT IF PEOPLE STOPPED SMOKING, WE WOULD SEE A SUBSTANTIAL DECLINE IN CANCER.

MOST CANCER SPECIALISTS LOOK TO THE GOVERNMENT TO PROTECT THE PEOPLE AGAINST CANCER CAUSING AGENTS IN THE ENVIRONMENT. DOCTOR PHILIP LEE, OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BLAMES THE GOVERNMENT FOR NOT DOING ENOUGH IN THAT AREA. ON THE OTHER HAND, HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S DOCTOR ELIZABETH WHELAN CLAIMS THAT AMERICANS ARE IN THE GRIP OF A NEW AND VERY SERIOUS EPIDEMIC DISEASE -- NAMELY THE FEAR OF CANCER. DOCTOR WHELAN THINKS THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO LESS REGULATING BECAUSE SCIENTISTS DO NOT REALLY KNOW WHAT CAUSES MOST CANCERS AND HOW TO CURE THEM.

DOCTOR WHELAN'S COLLEAGUES, FOR THE MOST PART, DO NOT AGREE WITH HER OPINION. THE PREVAILING VIEW AMONG THEM, AS EXPRESSED BY DOCTOR LEE, IS THAT EVEN IF WE ARE NOT QUITE CERTAIN WHETHER A SUSPECTED CHEMICAL IN THE ENVIRONMENT MAY OR MAY NOT CAUSE CANCER IN HUMANS, IT IS BETTER TO PLAY SAFE AND AVOID MAKING OR USING IT.